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X EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN HOME DEMONSTRATION AGENT\* X

By

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When the pioneer leader in home demonstration work looked for a home demonstration agent or home advisor she hoped to find a woman with a strong back, a determined mind, the courage to ride a horse, walk, master a Model T Ford, or a stubborn and belligerent county board of supervisors.

O. B. Martin mentions a few requirements for the home demonstration agent of his day:

"She should be an excellent cook, a high class seamstress, a scientific dietician -- a gardner, orchardist, farmer, carpenter, cabinet maker, and tinner -- nurse, sanitarian and health officer. He adds that while this is not a standard requirement it is good if the woman agent is a chorist, a gymnast, and an all round recreationist; but she must be an ambassador, a diplomat and a financier, and she must have some of the qualifications found in the best missionaries, colporteurs, and pastors."

Mr. Martin says that the evolution of a home demonstration agent into a position of respect was largely due to her ingenuity and independence. You see what an example was set for us by these early paragons. What a tribute these men paid to womankind when they admitted that any woman could be and do all these things. As a matter of fact if we analyze these "requirements" we find that in greater or less degree they describe the multiple functions of the average rural homemaker, 35 to 40 years ago. Or we might even say the rural homemaker of almost any era or any locality.

What of the trained, skilled, well rounded and successful home advisor or home agent of today? Have we grown to match the higher standards, the increased income, the broader horizons of present day farm people? Are our "requirements" in line with the stern pattern set by Knapp and Martin, Powell, McKimmon and other pioneer extension leaders? A mother said to her daughter "unless you are better, more efficient, and more useful than your mother, we have both failed." The good sense of that is apparent. The wisdom of the ages is truly cumulative. Some of the information used by our professional forbears might have been incorrect in the light of modern science but the philosophy we inherit from them is unchanging and deep-rooted. The home demonstration worker is one of the most avid learners on earth, and one of the most loyal and determined teachers. She is ever on the alert to get knowledge, dragging out facts to be used in helping the people plan programs to meet their particular needs and solve their peculiar problems. The high percentage of extension

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workers in school each year is one proof of our desire to keep learning in order to keep the position of trust and respect won by the first home demonstration workers in the field. In Mississippi where we have not always been up to the mark in the matter of technical training, we have 25% of the entire staff in school for some advanced training each year. University courses for extension workers were not in the picture, 30, 20 or even 15 years ago. We are learning too the value of constant on-the-job training, of planned and constructive supervision, of constant evaluation of our own efforts. The expert seamstress who is also a missionary, an ambassador and a "sanitarian" knows that rural people in 1949 are themselves developing and growing and moving forward. They give loyal support and friendly cooperation but they expect effective leadership backed up by dependable information and the know-how to keep a program moving forward.

It still takes a first rate woman to make a good home demonstration agent. There are occasions and circumstances where a good back still stands one in good stead. It still requires a fair degree of diplomacy to cope with the automobile, the pressure cooker, the deep freeze, the automatic washer. To keep in sight of the makers of new gadgets and appliances is no small job. There is still need for diplomacy in dealing with appropriation boards, sponsoring organizations, the co-worker in the office and in the field. No life of ease has ever been promised in a home demonstration job as far as I know. Home demonstration agents require more supervision to keep them from working too hard than to keep them working hard enough. Sooner or later the people take care of the sluggard, but they can't do much about the over zealous one other than give her a good, if untimely funeral, or possibly a soft cushion for her wheel chair.

What then are the advantages of the Home Demonstration Field as a profession for women? The experiences and observations over a long period in extension work, have crystalized a few ideas about home demonstration agents, their privileges, their advantages, the opportunities which come along with the job. We might take an honest look at the home demonstration agent's way of life. First -- what of the pay? Without being mercenary, the home demonstration agent still has to think seriously about salary if she is to keep pace with her job and keep herself in mental, physical, and social trim. I suppose you hear bitter complaint now and then and mention of the wonderful jobs open in other fields at double the pay, with shorter hours and easier work. This may be true for a few outstanding forceful people with exceptional personality and unusual ability in some special phase of home economics work -- but is it not true that the average home demonstration agent's salary compares favorably with that of women with the same training and experience in other professions? I always ask myself "where" when I hear something like that. There is opportunity for promotion to better paying counties and to State Staff positions, as the home agent gains experience, adds to her training and acquires more social poise and more knowledge of the world. Few extension workers stand still. It's a job that promotes growth.

One result of better pay and of more contacts with people is that the home agent is almost invariably one of the best dressed women in any group. She has close contact with clothing specialists and fashion editors. Her business takes her occasionally into cities where she sees people who make fashions a business. The nature of her work with women and girls makes her attentive to posture, to the selection of correct clothing, comfortable and suitable shoes, and the choice of "right" dress for all occasions. Extension men often remark to me "that girl is better looking since she came into home demonstration work."

The development of poise and assurance that comes with feeling well dressed and well equipped, is characteristic of the extension home economist who stays with the job for several years. The habit of assuming responsibility creates an air which inspires confidence. Admitting long hours, heavy duty, and not always the salary a top flight worker deserves, Extension offers one distinct advantage above most professions open to the agriculturist and the home economist -- that is the close contact with the best in rural life. Those with whom we work, the people who become our demonstrators, cooperators and leaders, are those whose minds are looking forward and upward, who believe in the future of American life and who are willing to work to make good things come to pass. In home demonstration work, for instance, do you not sometimes feel that we ask and expect the impossible of our club officers and leaders? In my section we have no paid local leaders. I doubt that any paid leader could get the response, or would be willing to do the work that some of our volunteer leaders seem to take as a matter of course. One of our best and most successful 4-H Club leaders with almost 20 years of service said in apparent surprise, "But I've learned all the time and I've had more fun than the boys and girls."

One of the most pleasant and gratifying things about the home demonstration agent's lot is the spontaneous appreciation and gratitude she receives from people. Nowhere in the professional world does the worker get more appreciation and praise for her efforts in line of duty. This is especially true of the home demonstration worker. It has always amazed me to see how people take a young worker to themselves, claim her, boost her morale, defend her before the world, and praise her to the skies. This course of treatment has made many a good home demonstration agent. Mena Hogan, Field Agent for the South, was appearing on the program with me in an anniversary meeting of the Home Demonstration Council in one of our largest and most prosperous counties. The chairman, in introducing each of us was so complimentary that I, for one, was almost embarrassed. When she came to the district agent, a former agent in that county, she waxed more enthusiastic. When it came time to introduce "our own home demonstration agent," she really paid tribute -- well deserved in that case at least. Miss Hogan wrote me this little note, "Just think, we get paid for this."

Perhaps the sense of satisfaction in doing work which so often results in actual and visible improvements in home and community life, is, after all, the greatest attraction in extension work. In defending a worker who couldn't

modernize her planning, who constantly wore herself out doing individual work, one of her home demonstration club leaders said to me, "but you can see her tracks all over this county." A member of a county board of supervisors said to me, "that woman has been worth a million dollars to this county. You couldn't pay for work like hers."

For a woman who likes working with people, there can be no monotony in home demonstration work. If you look I believe you will remember that every day in your career has been different, challenging your strength, your wits, and sometimes requiring all your sense of humor to get through, but for the most part satisfying and worthwhile.

Not long ago I had a talk with one of our best and finest home agents who has progressed from the lowest paid, most backward county to the best salary in the "capitol" county. She has made for herself an enviable place in business and professional life. She was telling me of a very fine trip she is to have as president of the Altrusa club. Of course she had a few miseries to tell me too and a few little grievances. When I was about to leave, I said, "Mary, how do you like being a home demonstration agent?" She whirled around and looked at me in amazement for a while, then looked me straight in the eye and said, "I wouldn't swap jobs with any woman I ever saw in any profession or any business, and that's the truth." And I believed her.

Dr. Margaret Justin spoke last year before a section of the Land Grant College Association, on training for home demonstration work. Among other things she said something which should be remembered in Extension circles. In effect she said that a home demonstration agent needs a four-way education. First, she should be educated as a human being - with a broad basis of history, literature, knowledge of the arts and sciences and of man's accomplishment. She should then be educated as a woman, because a woman needs, after a certain point in her intellectual training, a slightly different kind of education in order that she may be equipped to fill her purpose in creation which is to produce and protect life, to enhance living -- making it beautiful and happy. Then said Dr. Justin, she must be educated as a home economist, and finally she needs a special training to fit her for home demonstration work.

Home demonstration work has come into the sunlight. You are seeing the flowering from seeds planted long ago. The demands of the job will be greater. A growing consciousness and awareness in rural people everywhere calls for better training and more breadth, more force in the people whom they call to serve their needs. Extension work and extension methods are being studied as the answer to conditions of poverty, ignorance, prejudice and dirt, sickness and hate over the world.

You and your predecessors have built a profession in which a trained woman may find useful work, fair remuneration, opportunity for professional growth and for personality development. Add appreciation, a sense of accomplishment, the

loyal fellowship of co-workers, and may we not then speak with pride of this profession which grew out of the needs and problems of rural people? May we not think with pride of the 3,000 and more home demonstration agents in the United States and of those who perhaps will soon go out to other countries to start the planting of ideas? The work you do is no longer hidden from the world. It's a big work and we know many happy and successful women who have been able to reach a high level of efficiency, and satisfaction through the mastery of a challenging job. I congratulate you on your choice of a profession. I commend your judgment on coming into or staying with home demonstration work at this particular time, because you are employed in a growing concern. May you have happy days and your share of satisfaction in a worthwhile profession with an honorable history, and may you have a good, rich, and useful future.

